Military Support to Civil Authorities: the Eastern Ontario Ice Storm

by Joseph Scanlon

MARTIAL LAW EXERTS a continuing attraction for military planners who must address questions of civil disaster. Fortunately, cooler heads prevail, and nobody has declared martial law in the United States since the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in 1941. A major reason for backing away from this simple-appearing panacea is the fact that when you take over government, you take over all *government, including services.*

Thus, the eager military commander who wants to stabilize a municipality backs off from a martial rule declaration when he realizes that he will have to run everything from divorce court to library fines and garbage collection. And indeed both US and Canadian doctrine are quite explicit—the military comes into the disaster area to support, not replace, existing civil authority. For that matter, so does the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

This article examines an apparently straightforward case where Canadian military support was called in to aid a civil government that could not function because of an overwhelming ice storm. The big anomaly here was that civil government was not there. A week-old realignment of boundaries and levels of administration left large portions of Ontario without an identifiable civil government, though another legitimate civil authority had summoned military support. Think of the dilemma faced by the troop commander—here his soldiers are ready to support, there is plenty to be done, but there is no single identifiable civilian official to support.

If ever there was an opportunity for the military to take charge, this was it. Canada, US, UN, whatever, the instinct is to fill a void. But Canadian doctrine and training prevailed, resulting in an exemplary disaster relief performance. Let future unit commanders who think a

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civil situation is out of hand reflect on how these Canadian soldiers and their leaders coped with the ice storm of the millennium. And, as an exercise for the military student, one should likewise reflect on how to handle a parallel situation in an occupied area, friendly or hostile, or in the absence of civil authority, to determine how to support a government and its sundry services.

— Dr. James W. Kerr

The RMOC immediately opened its Emergency Operations Center (EOC), staffing it with police, fire, health and social service workers and a person from OC Transpo, a large transportation company that maintains a fleet of buses and provides metropolitan subway service. They were soon joined by an ad hoc team that acquired and distributed generators. Generators would go to emergency agencies such as rural police detachments, nursing homes and hospitals, persons with severe health problems and to agencies that could help others. Many fire departments sent firefighters with generators door-to-door providing enough power for families to boost up their heat or get a quick flow of water from their wells.

IN EARLY JANUARY 1998, eastern Canada was hit by three consecutive ice storms. Because the temperature remained at or below the freezing point, ice from the second storm piled up on the ice from the first. Ice from the third storm piled on top of that. The accumulated 3 to 4 inches of ice pulled down trees, power poles and even steel transmission towers. By the time the storms ended, one out of every five Canadians was without power and 66 municipalities in Eastern Ontario had declared a state of emergency. Like the hard-hit communities in neighboring Quebec, many requested military assistance, requests that led to an unusual situation in peacetime—military initiatives to create civilian government.

In the Regional Municipality of Ottawa Carleton (RMOC), a large urban-rural municipality that includes Canada's capital city, Ottawa, the ice accumulation was three times the record for a six-day period: 10 percent of the trees were destroyed and 70 percent were damaged. Roads and sidewalks were covered with ice and falling debris knocked out 80 traffic lights on regional roads. However, the RMOC had backup generators at all lift stations in the liquid waste system and at the liquid waste processing plant. It also had generators for all pumping stations on its fresh water distribution system. By working extended overtime, regional road crews also kept the major arteries open.

Nevertheless, on Thursday, 8 January, RMOC's senior officials—the chief administrative officer (CAO), chief of police, regional fire coordinator, medical officer of health, commissioner of environment and transportation and commissioner of social services—advised the elected regional chair to declare a state of emergency. Sidewalks were treacherous to walk on, and there was a risk of being hit by falling debris. The ice had created a public danger. At 10 a.m., the regional chair declared the first state of emergency in RMOC history.

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The RMOC also made three other key decisions:

- It would hold daily morning and afternoon news conferences to keep its residents informed about what was happening.
- It would provide help to its own residents and to the hard-hit rural areas beyond its borders.

- Cleanup problems were so serious it needed military assistance.

Because the region used its news conferences to provide clear and detailed information, the RMOC became the dominant source of public information throughout the emergency. The regional chair, who had taken office only days before the storm, became the region's best-known personality. His low-key style—he acted as news conference chairperson leaving the details to others—made him a highly regarded public figure.

It is the other two decisions, however, that are the focus of this article. Together they led to a unique chapter in civilian-military relations in Canada. The 1998 ice storm struck days after many Ontario municipal boundaries were changed, before the new municipalities organized their councils or even thought of drafting disaster plans. If Canadian forces were to assist civilian governments, they had to find a way to establish such governments. Working together, the RMOC and the 2nd Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group (2 CMBG) from Canadian Forces Base Petawawa, commanded by Brigadier General Rick Hillier, did just that: they assisted disaster-struck areas and then teamed up with the Ottawa-Carleton Region to establish civilian governments in those areas.*

Military Help Common

In Canada, the military is entirely under the federal government, and emergency response is a provincial responsibility since Canada has no equivalent to state National Guard units. Thus, military involvement in disaster relief usually occurs only when a province asks the federal government for troops to assist. While such invitations are not uncommon, they rarely come from the largest province, Ontario. Armed forces personnel, for example, provided accommodation, food and transportation when a flash flood hit the Saguenay region of Quebec, and they helped build levees and patrol flooded communities during the 1997 floods in the Red River Valley—the same flood that hit Grand Forks, North Dakota. They were called out after two terrorist kidnappings in Quebec and when aboriginals blocked highways and a major bridge in and around Montreal. But offers of military assistance were refused by Ontario when a toxic chemical incident led to the evacuation of 217,000 people in Mississauga and when 14 million rubber tires burned for 18 days in Nanticoke. However, the effects of the 1998 ice storm led to a request for assistance from Ontario and brought the largest military response to disaster relief in Canadian history. Overall, 15,000 troops were sent to assist disaster-stricken communities: 4,500 of those were sent to Eastern Ontario.

The RMOC's decision to hold twice-daily news conferences was made at the same meeting that led to the declaration of a regional emergency. The other two decisions—to assist the region's neighbors and to ask for military assistance—were less formal. The first came when the generator team asked the CAO what it should do about a request from a nursing home outside the region. The CAO said send it, and from then on the RMOC assisted its neighbors. It sent regional road crews to clear sidewalks so elderly persons could walk safely to shelters, and it sent supplies such as beds, cots, blankets, food, fuel and firewood to shelters and EOCs in and outside the region. Although senior

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**Canadian BG Rick Hillier is now assistant deputy commanding general, III Corps, Fort Hood, Texas.*

officials had discussed asking for military help, the decision to request it was hastened when the CAO determined that the amount of debris was so great that the cleanup required extra personnel. He asked a senior staff member, a former Army engineer, to see how military assistance might be requested.

In Canada, local requests for military aid go from the municipality to a province. The province passes it to the appropriate military authority in its own part of the country—in Ontario that is Land Forces Central Area (LFCA). That authority assesses the request and then reviews what resources are available and tasks a specific military unit. The authority also informs the National Defense Operations Center (NDOC) what it is doing. There is no need to seek federal emergency agency approval from Emergency Preparedness Canada (EPC), although EPC is normally advised and keeps the federal cabinet informed. However, if a request calls for more support than the forces designated as available within that province can provide, the request must follow another route, from the province to the appropriate authority to NDOC. From the NDOC it goes to the appropriate military unit. Again, no approval is required from EPC.

The RMOC request followed the shortest route. It went from RMOC headquarters to the provincial operations center in Toronto. The provincial government passed it to LFCA, which decided it could provide assistance and tasked 2 CMBG at Canadian Forces Base Petawawa. Although EPC did not formally approve this decision, the EPC staff was at the provincial operations center and briefed federal officials in Ottawa, who then briefed the prime minister.

Although 2 CMBG has responded to other Canadian disasters—including the Red River floods—the RMOC request for aid caught it somewhat unprepared although 2 CMBG does maintain an immediate reaction unit—a company-size unit that can be recalled and respond within 12 hours. The remainder of the battalion group (the Canadians call it a battle group) is on 24-hour recall. However, some troops had left earlier that day for Bosnia. The rest were still on Christmas leave. Hillier learned his brigade might be summoned when his son told him he had seen the prime minister announce a major deployment on television. Shortly thereafter, he received a formal call for assistance. Fortunately a number of his officers had come in to see their colleagues leave for Bosnia.

Troops Recalled

The 2 CMBG issued an immediate recall for all troops taking their leave in Ontario. Calling in troops from other parts of Canada would be expensive and would have added little: most troops were scheduled back in a few days. The recall—done by telephone fan-out—was highly effective: 75 percent of the troops were on hand that same day. However, the planning was a little more complicated. The tasking instructions were not specific about what was needed because the request, instead of defining the mission, indicated that the RMOC had told the province it needed about 200 troops, a figure that made little sense when reviewed at Petawawa. From what he knew, Hillier decided a major response was probably required. The following units were assigned: 2nd Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery; The Royal Canadian Dragoons; 1st Air Defence Regiment (Lanark and Renfrew Scottish);

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The ice storm not only knocked down trees and power lines, it disrupted the systems used to monitor problems. Only after a house-by-house inspection could power utilities tell if restoring power to a substation would bring back power or if hundreds of individual customer lines would also have to be restored. The telephone company had the same problem. . . . Through reconnaissance, the soldiers provided the first area-wide information on the precise extent of those problems. Their regular nightly debriefings and their well-marked maps soon became a crucial source of information for regional officials.

2 Combat Engineer Regiment; 2 CMBG Headquarters and Signals Squadron; 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment; 3rd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment; 2nd Service Battalion; 2nd Field Ambulance; and 2d Military Police (MP) Platoon.

Later that same day, a convoy of officers set out for the Ottawa-Carleton Region—normally a 2- to 3-hour drive from Petawawa. The main highway was covered with glare ice, and there were trees and power poles down everywhere. Yet, even though they had arrived in the middle of the night, senior RMOC officials were waiting to brief them. Once that briefing was over, police cars were ready to help officers make a reconnaissance. Hillier set up his headquarters in space provided at regional headquarters while his officers toured the impact area.

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In addition, while all 11 local municipalities in the region and all neighboring municipalities had opened reception centers, these were being used as drop-in centers not shelters. People came for a hot meal or a hot shower then returned home. As a result, teams of firefighters, volunteers, health and social service workers and police were going door-to-door to check on individuals, especially the elderly. Before long, these checks revealed several hundred persons were at risk. The situation was so serious that the troops deploying to the rural areas inside and outside the region were reinforced with reserves, some coming from Toronto and London, Ontario, others from Cape Breton and Newfoundland on the east coast, some even from the west coast naval base at Esquimault in British Columbia.

While the first responding officers were checking out the area, the remainder of the troops were ready to leave Petawawa. Because of the road conditions, that trip would be slow. When Hillier mentioned that, the CAO told the Commissioner of Environment and Transportation to send regional road crews to salt the provincial highway. Because the army needed a staging area for its personnel and equipment, the RMOC also arranged with the professional hockey arena to provide its parking lot. The arena staff welcomed the military inside and provided the troops with hot coffee. The arena is at the Petawawa end of the city on the cross-town artery, so it was a convenient staging area for arriving troops.

The next step was translating the request for help into specific tasks for particular units. Hillier saw the first role, or "thrust," as preventing loss of life. That meant clearing roads for emergency vehicles and assisting those who were in danger, such as the elderly. It also meant assisting police if that proved necessary. Next, it was important to prevent additional problems—for example, cutting down trees before they fell and caused further damage or power outages. Third came assisting with the cleanup and restoration by removing debris and assisting

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hydro crews by digging post holes. Implicit in all this was the psychological impact of a military response. The visible presence of soldiers suggests everything that *can* be done *is* being done. Most important, the military saw its role as providing well-defined support to the local authorities, not taking over their functions. That philosophy was to be challenged in less than 24 hours.

Military Resources

The soldiers left Petawawa with standard equipment for such a mission. They anticipated that basements would be flooded and there would be a need for generators. They expected downed trees and branches would need cutting, so they brought chainsaws. About 50 of the soldiers had telecommunications skills and helped telephone crews restore service by replacing or hooking up "drops" to individual customers. At first, the Army was reluctant to use skills in an area where civilian contractors were working. However, it accepted the argument that there were already more than 800 outside technical personnel, some from as far away as Manitoba. Bringing in more civilian crews would have put their home locations at risk.

[The teams] encountered an entirely unexpected problem. Because there were changes in many municipal boundaries on 1 January, there were conflicts among elected officials—two different officials would claim they were in charge of the response in the same municipality. Because new councils had not met and since there were no emergency plans, the officers did not know what to do. They were there to assist the civilian authority, but that assumed there was a civilian authority to assist.

The 2nd Field Ambulance brought 150 medical staff plus three additional physicians to provide medical support to the troops. When that was not needed, they started offering help elsewhere. They worked in nursing homes that were understaffed because of the ice storm. They sent a few soldiers to the emergency department in Kemptville Hospital. In the Perth and Carleton Place areas, where they provided eight ambulances, they were linked directly into the civilian ambulance radio system. The medically trained soldiers also went to shelters and did assessments, but any problems they identified were referred to civilian medical staff. The troops themselves suffered relatively few injuries.

Canadian military medical personnel, like US military personnel, have a range of medical skills. The top level, physicians' assistants, are the equivalent of US Army medics, and their skills are more developed than the civilian paramedics'. However, these skills are not recognized in Canada and, despite a formal request, the Army was unable to get provincial approval for its soldiers to use their medical skills. The province consulted the local medical authorities, who said they could provide all the help required. Despite that, Hillier told his soldiers to provide whatever assistance was required.

Soldiers also became involved in a host of other tasks. They used military transport to haul supplies such as fuel, food, bottled water and firewood. MPs worked with civilian police to patrol the high-impact areas. Although they did not have "powers of arrest," they were able to stop suspected persons long enough to allow a civilian police response. They also supported police patrols by tracking suspect vehicles using lights from helicopters. In one instance, they assisted a dairy farmer who, because of the power outage, had not been able to milk his herd. An officer found two soldiers raised on farms and they milked the cows by hand. In all these tasks, they worked closely with the regional government: OC Transpo, for example, provided transport to reserve units that had been called in. The buses and drivers stayed with the units throughout the deployment.

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house inspection could power utilities tell if restoring power to a substation would bring back power or if hundreds of individual customer lines would also have to be restored. The telephone company had the same problem—its remotes were out, and drop lines to more than 25,000 homes were out. Again, a house-by-house check was needed. Through reconnaissance, the soldiers provided the first area-wide information on the precise extent of those problems. Their regular nightly debriefings and their well-marked maps soon became a crucial source of information for regional officials.

No Local Government

Although most things were going well, the officers supervising work outside the region's borders encountered an entirely unexpected problem. Because there were changes in many municipal boundaries on 1 January, there were conflicts among elected officials—two different officials would claim they were in charge of the response in the same municipality. Because new councils had not met and since there were no emergency plans, the officers did not know what to do. They were there to assist the civilian authority, but that assumed there was a civilian authority to assist. The province had run into the same problem: it had sent Ontario Provincial Police officers to locate some municipalities. Because of the boundary changes, it was not clear where a new government was meeting or indeed if it was organized.

Like the region, the military did not see political boundaries as significant when responding to a disaster. They wanted to help where it was needed most. However, boundaries and political entities are important to civilians and it became clear it was necessary to accept this. By Saturday night, 10 January, it was apparent many major problems were not in the region—where things were now going quite well—but in nearby towns. After hearing this from the military, the region called in a senior official to check this out. On Sunday, 11 January, after a quick conference at the regional EOC, the staff member, a vice president from Ontario Hydro and a staffer from the Ontario EMO flew by military helicopter to Vankleek Hill. There they met another representative from provincial EMO and, later, were joined by the premier of Ontario and the solicitor general. All were shocked at the widespread damage they saw.

That night Hillier urged EMO liaison people to set up a provincial operations center for the rural areas near Ottawa-Carleton. He proposed locating the center in a town called St-Isadore-de-Prescott. Later, after discussing the matter with regional staff, Hillier changed his proposal: operations centers were needed at Hawkesbury, Winchester, Perth, Casselman and Alexandria. That proposal was put forward forcefully to two provincial EMO staff members. Both said they would pass the message to Toronto but that they had no power to make a decision. Frustrated, Hillier asked that the major general commanding LFCA call the province. The Regional Chair also made a personal call to Ontario Premier Mike Harris. Early on the morning of Wednesday, 13 January, the deputy minister and assistant deputy minister—the persons to whom provincial EMO reports—were at regional headquarters. They agreed that the region could send liaison persons to these EOCs as provincial representatives. Military pressure for civilian leadership led to a provincial decision to allow regional staff to assume a provincial role

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in providing civilian direction.

Before the senior EMO representatives arrived, the region requested an official act as liaison with municipalities outside the region and find persons to staff these five centers. Regional staff started looking for people who knew the area and, ideally, were bilingual because much of the area is French-speaking. Before being sent out, the staff was told to offer help in any way that seemed appropriate. They were also told they were being sent on behalf of the province, not the RMOC. Eventually they were sent badges identifying them as Ontario EMO representatives. That day staff was sent to three of the communities. The next day staff was sent to the other two.

The persons sent as liaison officers got a mixed reception. In Hawkesbury, where a well-organized EOC had been running since the emergency began, there was little need for their presence. Hawkesbury was already arranging for its own firewood and generators and had a good and effective liaison with Ontario Hydro. However, in Alexandria, part of a brand new area called North Glengarry, there were disputes among members of council and disputes between council and local school boards. RMOC staff had to facilitate an agreement about who should take charge. In effect, they worked out arrangements for an elected civilian leader, who then directed the emergency response from the newly created EOC. The same solution had already been applied in Hawkesbury, where the Ontario Provincial Police detachment commander had convinced local politicians that one elected person had to be in charge.

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Although the RMOC sent out liaisons before there was agreement with the province, the decision to do so was given provincial backing the following day. At a meeting involving the Regional Chair, a local member of the provincial legislature, several provincial cabinet ministers and Premier Harris, the CAO said that the region had moved well beyond its boundaries to provide help. Harris said that action was welcome. With the premier endorsing what was being done, there was no room for further debate. Once the new EOCs were functioning, things began to work smoothly. RMOC staff rounded up beds, cots and blankets from a federal supply center. They got food, water, firewood and generators from the federal government, the provinces, other communities and the private sector. They used civilian and military transport to move these supplies to the EOCs and to local shelters.

Although many concerns about provincial relations disappeared after the personal visit by Harris, some remained. Almost until the end of the incident, provincial EMO was insisting that requests for supplies be sent to Toronto, approved in Toronto and then shipped from Toronto. That became increasingly frustrating to regional staff because supplies needed for shelters—such as food for hot meals—did not arrive when they were needed. A regional official told the senior EMO representative at regional headquarters that he understood the province had to approve expenditures made in its name. However, unless regional staff could obtain supplies locally, so they could be delivered when needed, the RMOC would stop acting as a provincial supply point. Permission was given.

Military personnel ran into similar frustrations. They were in direct contact with the RMOC's EOC and relayed any requests they received directly to it so EOC staff could decide what was appropriate. Con-

cerns were quickly sorted out, especially after the RMOC had liaisons in the five rural EOCs. However, requests from provincial EMO came from EMO's Provincial Operations Center in Toronto to the military operations center at regional headquarters to the army on-site command posts. Communications and coordination problems such as these led the military to support an RMOC demand that the province set up a forward operations center in Eastern Ontario. As a result of that combined pressure, one was established at RMOC headquarters close to the military operations center.

The military also had some disagreements with provincial EMO because of a difference in philosophy. EMO's view is that municipalities must take care of their own needs from their own resources, from neighboring communities and from the private sector, asking for help only when that was impossible. That is what might be called the "pull" approach. The military operates on a completely different philosophy called the "push" theory. It keeps pumping in supplies until it is clear that all needs are met. Then it starts making decisions about what is appropriate. In an emergency, the problem is not only getting supplies, it is finding enough information to make a correct judgment about what is needed. The military argued it was senseless to wait for full information: push in supplies and get rid of the excess later. The military also made certain there were abundant and free supplies of necessities such as candles and bottled drinking water to prevent shortages resulting in escalating prices.

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Perception is Important

The emergency period lasted almost three weeks, and throughout that period, local media focused on it. For example, CBC (public) television broadcast the RMOC's twice-daily news conferences and a local radio station did the same. That station also ran nonstop phone-in shows outlining what was happening, praising the work of emergency crews and reporting complaints from the public. The Canadian forces monitored that station throughout the deployment, responding immediately to any complaints. When the deployment ended, Hillier dropped by the station unannounced to thank the staff for its public service.

Hillier also took steps to make sure that his soldiers were visibly assisting, not taking over, so that when his troops departed there would be no problems with the continuing emergency response. When visits to the various EOCs showed that in some centers the military appeared to be dominating the response, he told his staff at a regular night briefing to correct the situation. The troops had to be in a separate part of the EOC, and it had to be clear to anyone visiting the EOC that civilians were in charge.

Although there is no survey data on the public perception of the military response, there are informal indications it was well received. Hillier became a major public figure and received sustained applause when he attended a professional hockey game after the emergency ended. The region also honored him and the units involved at a public reception. More significant, not long after the storm, 2 CMBG held a major exercise in the Ottawa Valley, setting up camps, patrolling roads, simulating civil conflict as part of a major peacekeeping exercise. The media attention and public response were enormously positive.

There were several reasons for that positive reaction. Although many civilians were surprised to see how young the soldiers were, they were im-

pressed to see persons so young doing something so useful. In fact, the Eastern Ontario fire chiefs specifically mentioned this during their debriefing. Additionally, there was a great deal of interaction between the troops and civilians and between the troops and emergency personnel. The troops, for example, shared food and accommodations and fire halls with firefighters and power workers. Hillier also made visits throughout the area, always stopping to talk with civilians about their needs.

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Likewise, the efficiency of military reconnaissance left a very strong impression on the civilian authorities. While the term "reconnaissance" is well known, its significance was not fully understood until the soldiers arrived on location. Civil authorities were very impressed by the soldiers' strict discipline. Throughout the response, soldiers were told that they were not to consume any alcohol, even though many civilians were anxious to buy them a beer to show their appreciation. When a few soldiers broke this rule—even though each had accepted only one beer from friendly civilians—they were immediately shipped back to Petawawa.

The Canadian military responded in a timely manner to a devastating natural disaster that brought 66 municipalities in Eastern Ontario to its knees. Because the civilian government could not function due to the destruction wrought by the accumulated ice, the military was called in to aid the civil government. With the new realignment of boundaries and levels of administration, large portions of Ontario were left without an identifiable civil government, though another legitimate civil authority had summoned the military support. Canadian military doctrine and training prevailed, resulting in an exemplary disaster relief performance.

The Canadian military response to this natural disaster should validate for future US Army leaders the correct method of establishing civil-military operations—the military comes into the disaster area to support, not replace, existing civil authority. ***MR***

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